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## No more waiting for Superman: teaching DIY urbanism and reflexive practice

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Self-made urbanity is not a new phenomenon. However, decades of economic restructuring and a neoliberalization of the city and state have made the public realm vulnerable to changes in the economic winds. Increasingly, such an environment poses limits to what can be done via formal planning and urban design processes while do-it-yourself (DIY) activities challenge basic assumptions of who and how spaces may be produced. We (the authors) have recognized this challenge and have worked to bring this awareness into our classroom. Through this paper, we illustrate how DIY approaches have been integrated into our interdisciplinary course, the Community Planning Workshop. We describe how the classroom environment can foster an appreciation for DIY approaches, how DIY practices bring the social and the physical into focus, and how grassroots' strategies have transformational impacts upon students and their understanding of the roles of design and planning professions.

**Keywords:** DIY; community planning; urban design; pedagogy

### Introduction: The Community Planning 101 – The Do-it-Yourself City

People are doing it themselves, informally and spontaneously – whether as needed or simply as inspiration strikes. People are installing fanciful and functional infrastructure, which is intended to improve everyday life, firms are developing projects in underutilized spaces to make contributions even when there is no client, and community groups are taking neighborhood planning into their own hands. (Gordon Douglas 2012, 43)

Self-made urbanity is not a new phenomenon – globally, “informal” landscapes of cities have long challenged planners in places like Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Portes, Castells, and Benton 1989). By contrast, as the architectural writer Gordon Douglas (Douglas 2012) recently suggested, the “formal” city of the “global north” or “the city of advanced capitalism” (43) is possibly the newer, more recent trend. Our global history is one written by many hands and inclusive of many spatial practices, despite the fact that this range of activities has rarely been acknowledged. However, decades of economic restructuring and crisis have impacted cities in the United States (starting as early as the 1970s and most recently in the *great recession* of the first decade of the 2000s) and, thus, an interest in grassroots urbanism has emerged precisely because such efforts have become visible in pronounced ways.

This same era witnessed an increased reliance upon the marketplace to produce urban space, a neoliberalization of the city and state, and a commodification of place, which has

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made the public realm vulnerable to changes in the economic winds (Miraftab 2004; Purcell 2009; Brenner, Peck, and Smith 2010). Increasingly, such an environment poses limits to what can be done via formal planning and urban design processes while do-it-yourself (DIY) activities challenge basic assumptions of who and how spaces may be produced. Planners and urban designers, in this sense, must be taught to understand and engage the DIY city in ways that both broaden the academy and reinforce the important roles that they must play in place-making.

In most studio courses, students are preparing to engage in more formal planning or design processes taking place within the confines of local government or design firms. The methods applied in such venues often have limited applicability to grassroots or highly participatory environments. For example, typical studio or workshop-based activities encourage limited outside input as design and planning students gather information; they then return to the isolation of their desks. We recognize this as a missed opportunity and have worked to bring awareness of and respect for alternative ways of planning and designing into our classroom. By contrast, DIY approaches require that planners and designers be embedded in a community. In this way, we aim to prepare our students for playing an active role in DIY place-making following graduation, thereby becoming relevant and beneficial partners for struggling communities.

Through this paper, we illustrate how DIY approaches to design and urbanism have been integrated into our interdisciplinary course, the Community Planning Workshop, and we reflect upon the possibility of effectively merging grassroots community interests with students need to learn. We describe how the classroom environment can foster an appreciation for DIY approaches, how DIY practices bring the social and the physical into focus, and how grassroots strategies have transformational impacts upon students and their understanding of the roles of design and planning professions in helping foster community change.

Grassroots engagements with local communities help overcome the “dual dilemma” (Cuff 1992) that often arises in academic settings – one that isolates students and the profession at large. Our graduate level workshop builds upon literature that frames neighborhood planning and design as strategies to make existing community assets operational (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Because we emphasize a community-led process in which students engage with residents who *plan for themselves* (Checkoway 1984; Baum 1997), our approach aims to match students’ need to learn with the pressing needs of our most challenged neighborhoods (Reardon 1998). We consciously chose this setting in order to encourage students to see design and planning as a transformational activity that address power dynamics and inequality (Dalton 1986). It should be noted that our course, which is required for both the Master’s of Urban Design program (School of Architecture) and the Community Planning track of the Master of Geography and Earth Sciences, has no prerequisites other than graduate standing; typically, our students (who come from undergraduate experiences ranging from architecture to landscape architecture, from planning to geography – even interior design) take this course in their first semester at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

While these issues can be raised in a variety of settings, we believe that the integration of DIY approaches into a hands-on design seminar allows for a richer learning experience for the students (Elwood 2004; Lee and Breitenberg 2010) – one that encourages a form of reflexive practice that is open to “informal” activities. In this sense, our workshop provides students opportunities to put *research into action* – to engage actively in the critical evaluation of theory through specific case studies involving local residents. This teaching strategy allows us to position the Community Planning Workshop as a space of “reciprocal

engagement” in which our students “can prepare *for* the world, *in* the world” (Cantor 2010, 6–8) while sharing their skills with communities in need (Brooks et al. 2002). This arrangement allows students to transfer skills while also challenging them to question *what they think they know* in light of local knowledge(s) they encounter (Rosaldo 1993; Fischer 2000; Corburn 2003). By emphasizing “bottom-up” concerns, we aim to instill in our students an understanding that planners and designers must get to know, understand and appreciate the diverse constituencies that make up metropolitan centers (Chettiparamb 2006).

In the remainder of this paper we will illustrate how we have built our pedagogical framework upon notion that the “nexus between conceptual and operational understanding” is best articulated through public scholarship (Freestone, Thompson, and Williams 2006). This discussion points to the strengths of hands-on learning environments in the development of critically reflective practitioners and in addressing the dual dilemma (Cuff 1992; Mitchell 2008) that often plagues the academy.

We then provide an overview of the Community Planning Workshop at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Through a principal project – a neighborhood action plan, the workshop aims: (1) to challenge students to engage and understand multicultural contemporary cities while challenging their own preconceptions of who and what make up the public(s); (2) to introduce the idea that design can serve to catalyze an inclusive public realm; and (3) to develop reflexive student practitioners who critically assess and adapt their growing knowledge base (theory) in order to enable the DIY, or grassroots, practices of local residents. We continue with a discussion of the experiences of students in a recent iteration of our course (2011) as represented through weekly written reflections and examples of the products created in partnership between neighborhood residents, students, and faculty. The comments illustrate the struggles and the learning moments that students encounter as they work with their community partners and examples of completed work highlights results of DIY planning processes with participation of students. We conclude with a discussion of the workshop environment, which, we posit, provides the most appropriate venue for introducing students to the idea that they are not alone in shaping the world around them.

### DIY urbanity and public scholarship

For many people, the recent trend in “do-it-yourself” design activities may seem to be an outcome of the recent economic downturn. For others, the DIY movement may stem from an interest growing within the consuming public to be able to create, craft, and control aspects of everyday life that appear threatened in an increasingly globalized and corporatized landscape. It is clear that DIY activities have gained a new level of visibility and, to some extent, this can be measured by the number of television programs, museum exhibitions, and web-based resources that have emerged recently.<sup>1</sup>

Academic discourses, however, have addressed grassroots urbanism for decades through critiques of mainstream planning raised by Chase, Kaliski, and Crawford (1999), Michele De Certeau (1980), Henri Lefebvre (1974), and Guy Debord (1967).<sup>2</sup> In a sense, academic discussions of planning and urban design now include a variety of both mainstream and marginal practices – at least *in theory*.

While DIY efforts offer unique opportunities for citizen-based action, often communities that are the most at risk are also the least able to mobilize in order to make urban spaces more vibrant, safe or sustainable. It is not uncommon to hear of a neighborhood group or a not-for-profit whose efforts have resulted in a community garden; but, in many

neighborhoods recently hit by the foreclosure crisis, for example, mobilization efforts are hampered on a number of fronts: low rates of ownership inhibit physical alterations of the landscape, absentee landlords who fail to maintain properties, high turnover in residential profiles, the challenges of low-wage employment – a list that seems to have no end.

Our workshop engages communities such as these as a way of helping rebuild both the social and the physical landscapes of our city. However, our efforts run the risk of being perceived as co-opting local efforts; residents, for example, may fear outsiders who intervene “briefly” only to move on after their perceived charity work has been accomplished or outsiders may be perceived as taking control of a local initiative and, thus, further disenfranchising residents. In one instance, a local organization created a community garden in a neighborhood without consulting residents – the result was that the garden was not seen as the residents’ and it has not been used (Sorensen and Bengle 2014). Perceptions such as these can complicate, if not quash, grassroots’ expression. This kind of intervention represents the traditional role of outside experts pursuing a solution to a challenge while the process of planning, design, and implementation is handled with only modest public input. Traditional practices also often frame DIY initiatives as “unsanctioned” interventions that fail to conform with local land use or other codes. In this sense, DIY activities may be seen as challenges to conventional planning and design practices as well as municipal efforts to provide equitable access and to guarantee public safety.

Issues such as these raise complex questions for both students and traditionally trained professionals. Our initial answer is to encourage students to think of themselves not as designing or planning *for* the neighborhoods in which they are working; instead, we ask students to design and/or plan *with* them. In order to do so, our students often must initially help organize and partner with a constituency that can lead a neighborhood-based planning process at some later stage (Jones 1990; Reardon 2009). This has, in recent years, meant that our students have engaged interdisciplinary skills of community activism and organizing as first steps towards neighborhood empowerment (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Reardon 1998; Merrett 2000).

By partnering with community agents, the class is strategically positioned to pursue scholarly activities while addressing civically meaningful challenges (Wiewel and Lieber 1998; Cole and Foster 2001; Wilson, Hutson, and Mujahid 2008). Thus, the class provides opportunities to foster real community change through a focus on both *process* (projects that originate with the needs of community partners, community organizing as an integral part of the process, and empowerment as an explicit goal for the partnership) and *product* (a usable plan that is written with residents as its main audience and with an emphasis on resident implementation – on DIY activities). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate this dual focus where students engage with the community and process the information given to them into a usable element of the final plan.

### **The reflexive practitioner and the dual paradox of the academic setting**

In order for design professions to gain an appreciation for DIY, or grassroots, design or planning efforts, it is necessary that students become reflexive in ways not typically addressed in the academy. Reflexive practice is not a new goal; in fact, the often referenced “Boyer Report” (1996) emphasized the importance that reflexivity held for professional architectural education;<sup>3</sup>

The education of students about the scientific, social, aesthetic, political, and environmental foundations of architecture, should not be about teaching disembodied skills and facts. The standards should stress active inquiry and learning by doing, rather than the accumulation of

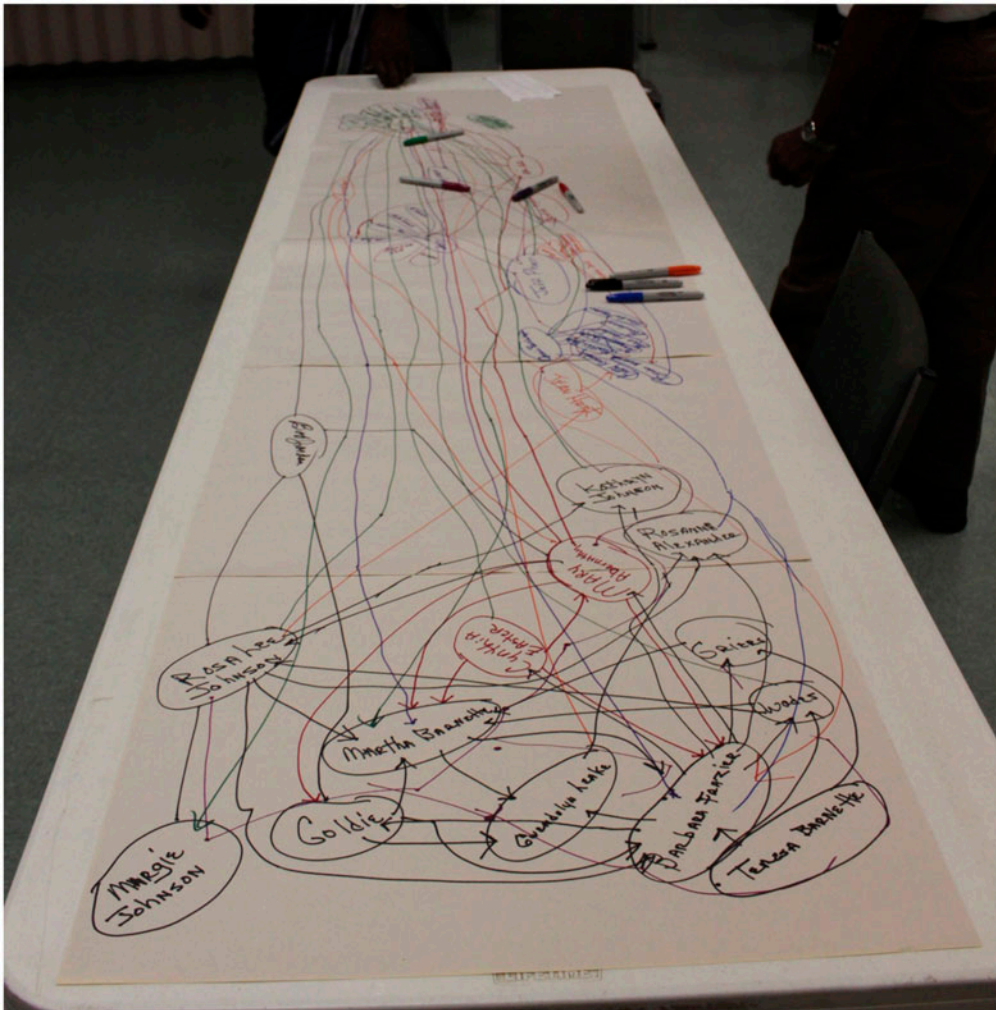


Figure 1. “Social Capital” mapping exercise in which residents drew their connections to others in the neighborhood and made notes indicating skills available to share.

facts from texts, required lectures, or design problems handed ready-made to students. Further, students should be partners in extending the knowledge base of the profession through reflective practice. Learning to define problems, asking the right questions, and weighing alternative approaches must be at the heart of architecture study. (Boyer and Mitgang 1996, 72)

This echoes earlier work focused upon the reflexive practitioner. In his research focused upon architectural education, Donald Schon (Schon 1987) pointed out that design education occurred in a collaborative and demonstrative manner. The learning environments proposed by Boyer and Schon, among others, require critical engagement with both an intellectual and a professional milieu. However, in many cases, this leads to the *practice of professional skills* and situations in which “practice defines the questions and teachers and students struggle together to craft the answers” (Baum 1997, 26). As the architectural educator Dana Cuff (Cuff 1992) has illustrated, design exercises are “composed for

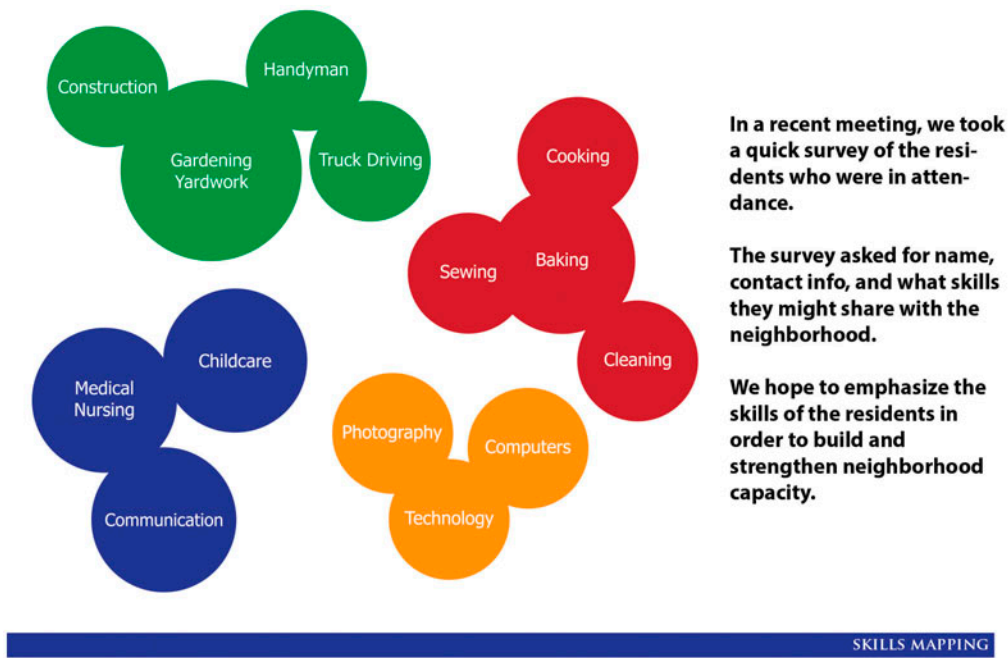


Figure 2. Revised map produced by students after the “social capital” mapping exercise from Figure 1.

didactic reasons, so complex problems are simplified, variables are isolated for study, and a series of educational experiences are coordinated” (65). The academic setting, thus, often removes problems from contextual constraints in order to clarify and focus upon specific issues within a coordinated set of increasingly complex learning experiences. This combination of factors distances the classroom from the community beyond, which limits the capacity of design education to address questions of social change. One unintended result is a dual paradox: (1) intellectual distancing enables a form of reflexivity limited typically to an individual student’s problem solving skills; and (2) the problem solving skills of students remain too limited to be applicable in environments increasingly characterized by diverse and often competing constituencies.

Our engagements with local communities are intended to overcome this dual dilemma by addressing issues of public import as both scholars and emerging professionals through research, critical speculation and active partnerships (Latham 2003). Student actions in specific neighborhoods reinforce their academic learning experiences in ways that introduce the richness of real constraints and opportunities. Students are, therefore, pushed to become agents of grassroots change – they are asked to look beyond designing for the status quo and to think beyond well-organized constituencies, municipalities, or developers. They are asked to support the DIY actions of local residents and, as a result, the students are forced to challenge their preconceived notions of appropriate design activities and projects.<sup>4</sup> In this way, our workshop provides a venue for hands-on, civically engaged learning that fosters a “pragmatic value” that designers must develop if they are to be effective multicultural practitioners (Sletto 2010, 404). We argue that our model, because it is situated within an activist and social justice-based tradition of scholarship, is able to focus upon a set of contexts not from the confines of the classroom but instead from the

intimacy of the field (Morrell, Sorensen, and Howarth [under review](#)). This embedded approach provides opportunities to move beyond the comfort zone of more traditional service-learning models (Goldsmith [1998](#)).

### Students in space: learning from Windy Ridge

The case study based model of our Community Planning Workshop provides opportunities to test theories, to identify their limits, and to rebuild those theories through the specificity of unique contexts. In this way, we avoid a technical practicum while also avoiding a forum for postulations that go unchecked against specific circumstances. In fact, the challenges that characterize some of our neighborhoods serve to prompt critical reflection upon design and planning as both research and as restorative practices. The following story of our partnership with the Windy Ridge neighborhood (one of a total of six neighborhoods we have partnered with in the class over the past three years) illustrates the role of our workshop as teaching environment shaped by “reflection in action” (Brocato 2009).

Windy Ridge, like many neighborhoods, has felt the impacts of the national economic downturn; however, this is a subdivision that has been impacted exceptionally hard by the foreclosure crisis in Charlotte, NC. In fact, Windy Ridge was one of two neighborhoods used to illustrate what the *Atlantic Monthly Magazine* (March 2008) speculated would become our nation’s future slums; in this sense, Windy Ridge was thrust into the national consciousness as emblematic of the national lending and real estate debacle. The reason – only five years after developers started construction (in 2002), 81 of Windy Ridge’s 132 homes had lapsed into foreclosure and, by 2008, many had been through foreclosure three or more times. At its worst in 2007, dozens of homes were vacant, windows were smashed, doors kicked in, vandals had ripped copper wire from walls, and drug users had invaded empty houses. As Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Department Director Debra Campbell noted, “within five years we’re reaching the need for revitalization strategies that used to take a neighborhood 25 years to reach” (quoted in Chandler and Mellnik [2007](#), p. 1A).

Windy Ridge, therefore, provided the very timely (albeit unfortunate) opportunity for our workshop to explore factors contributing to the foreclosure crisis that continue to challenge our cities – including public policy, civic culture, development and land-use regulations, and the clustering of low-income neighborhoods. As the semester began, we emphasized the point that we (faculty and students) were not going in to “fix” Windy Ridge; rather, our task was to see community residents as active agents in a partnership. Using basic readings from anthropology, sociology and ethnography (Schatzman and Strauss [1972](#); Crane and Angrosino [1992](#); Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw [1995](#)), we introduced students to the processes involved in getting to know communities and community organizing. The students began by taking responsibility for the logistics involved with holding small public meetings such as “flyering” the neighborhood to invite participation, securing and setting up meeting spaces, and arranging to provide daycare for the children of attendees.

During this time, students also collected information descriptive of the neighborhood as they simultaneously built the community capacity necessary to engage in a design or planning process later. This included gathering information available from public sources such as aerial photographs, homeownership patterns, crime data, local zoning and land use, and transportation routes and connectivity, to name a few. However, we treated these data as both incomplete and possibly incorrect. By characterizing this information as “what we think we know,” students began to recognize that their outside research was only

one layer of information. The methods above are applied in most workshop courses and are important tools for planning and urban design students to master. Our course, however, challenged the students to see what their traditional approaches meant to DIY, or activist, planners in the neighborhood. In conversation with these activists, students learned about the stories behind the data they had collected – personal stories of predatory lending, of evictions due to landlords failing to pay mortgages on their rental property, of long periods without street lights due to an Home Owner's Association (HOA) having failed to pay a power bill, or of knowing who was breaking into houses but fearing retaliation. This intense interaction with residents pushed students to understand the value of other forms of knowledge that cannot be found on the internet, in books or on campus. Local knowledge, or the knowledge found only in the experiences of others, provides a way not only to enhance what the students are learning but also to help assess, critique, and reconstruct in more responsive forms the seemingly neutral tools of the design and planning professions, such as maps (Fischer 2000).

Critically, this kind of engagement comes with responsibility. It is, therefore, important to note that the course takes place within the larger framework of two research initiatives: the Charlotte Action Research Project (CHARP), a project directed by the second author and largely modeled on her 10-year tenure as a graduate student and later a staff member of the East St. Louis Action Research Project (Reardon 1998), plays a primary leadership role; and the Design + Society Research Center (DSRC – soon to be rebranded as the City.Building.Lab.), the public outreach arm of the Urban Design program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, which is directed by the first author, in a supporting role. With this support, the partnership with Windy Ridge has grown into its sixth year with results ranging from advocacy on issues connected to crime (e.g. having successfully helped the neighborhood navigate a process of removing responsibility for streetlight from the dysfunctional HOA and making it a city responsibility) to several neighborhood clean-ups and celebrations (Sorensen, Gamez, Shockey, Moore, Borisenko, and Tirado 2013). Importantly, residents were closely involved in planning and implementing all these efforts and the work of the students in our community planning workshop becomes the starting point for CHARP's and DSRC's action research initiatives to be built upon.

Windy Ridge illustrates how a specific case study can be instructive in a broader and more general sense. Very briefly, students uncovered unique characteristics in the Windy Ridge context that raise questions about urban design, planning, and development processes. For example, initial student findings pointed out that Windy Ridge was/is surrounding by industrial land uses and an active rail line on all but one side; more importantly, four previous Superfund sites turned up within this industrial landscape – one within 1000 feet of resident homes (all within a 2-mile radius of the neighborhood). Anecdotal evidence also emerged indicating that many of Windy Ridge's residents were Section 8 recipients who had been recruited to come to Windy Ridge from local public housing or apartment complexes. The high numbers of these residents created a situation in which this neighborhood had almost instantly become a new kind of concentrated poverty – a de facto form of suburban public housing located alongside toxic landscapes.

These findings combined to feed our discussions and our analysis in class. This led us to frequently put the neighborhood through what we called “the mom test” (Would your mom let you live here?). As one might guess, Windy Ridge repeatedly failed this test, thus prompting countless teachable moments about the overlooked red flags, which were framed by readings, on the one hand, about *the city as a growth machine* (Molotch 1976), and readings, on the other hand, focused upon spatial justice (Beard 2003; Campbell 2003; Sandercock and Attili 2009).

As the semester neared its end, students moved towards a visioning and implementation strategy stage. The limitations of the compressed time frame (the short span of a semester) meant that this process had to be limited in scope but open-ended in nature so that work could continue in future workshops and/or other venues. To be effective, the students focused their energy on the immediate needs of strengthening the neighborhood association, addressing crime and creating a public space with a playground. This focus also involved programming activities that would help maintain the momentum of the neighborhood association in the absence of the students. They researched model programs and developed cookbook/recipe-style action plans directions (Reardon 2009) so that neighborhood residents design projects on their own or with limited outside support.

Our work continues in Windy Ridge and residents' grassroots efforts, supported by the university, have led to a number of successes. For example, implementation of action plans for a "gang prevention" project; neighborhood organization meetings have continued and built enough momentum to secure a city-sponsored US\$25 000 Neighborhood Matching Grant, which focused on landscape improvements and security issues; and the neighborhood has maintained strong partnerships that led to the successful deployment of an AmeriCorps Vista volunteer. In these ways, our Community Planning Workshop fosters a circle of interconnected relationship building, rich applied teaching opportunities and ongoing research. One result has been what reporter David Perlmutter (Perlmutter 2010) has called a "neighborhood reborn" – a description that contrasts with those in the press that brought this neighborhood to the nation's attention.

These successes point to strategies that can overcome potential concerns that local efforts might be co-opted or that local efforts would be seen as non-conforming in some way. By working to empower local residents to initiate and pursue activities and projects that address concerns that have not yet been well addressed by city officials, our efforts have helped to formalize informal activities. Student efforts have helped to bring together residents in one of the city's most vulnerable neighborhoods, albeit through small steps, in order to enable them to *do things themselves* despite inaction of absentee landlords or a lack of resources. These small social acts have begun to signal big changes in a physical landscape – one now articulated through the actions of people in place. Successes such as those listed above also serve to protect the space of critical engagement that our workshop represents; stakeholders such as representatives of local planning, neighborhood development and other services have recognized the social capital that our students have helped seed and invested in through their efforts. In fact, the students' investment, particularly in terms of time commitment in the neighborhood, far exceeds what can be expected from a typical professional. As neighborhood residents become more active, their voices and causes gain clarity and momentum – this aids civic officials in their efforts to identify concerns that need to be addressed. In this sense, the work stemming from the workshop, while sometimes pointing to sensitive issues, remains a valuable asset to our community partners be they powerful stakeholders or those seeking the power to transform their local landscapes.

### Transformational third spaces

We see our Community Planning Workshop as an action-based research environment similar to what Nancy Cantor (Cantor 2010) of Syracuse University calls a "third space of engagement," which helps to develop students' abilities to adapt to changing circumstances and to respond reflectively to the complex challenges (Brooks 2002). In our model, we have come to rely upon two types of "third spaces": the hybrid classroom

setting and the embedded learning environment of the living urban context. Our hybrid workshop moves between seminar and studio formats in order to address the complexities found in our case study settings. This framework gives students opportunities to foster real community change through a focus on *process* (assignments that involve community organizing and empowerment as explicit goals), *product* (a usable plan that is written with residents); the example in Figure 3 illustrates translations of community-engaged work into programming that is very different than more traditional outcomes of studio/workshop classes, and a sustained *partnership* that lasts beyond the semester. This framework provides necessary educational, research, and collaborative opportunities that are made operational through the lens of public scholarship.

In order to gauge the student's growth relative to reflexivity, we ask them to provide weekly two-page written reflections that address the readings for the course, the issues they face in their interactions with residents, and thoughts about the design and planning as catalysts for change. As hoped, students expressed a critical engagement with both the readings and the emerging roles that they took on in the class. In one instance, student A, struggled with questions of neutrality:

I started this reflection questioning when or if we should move from data collectors to “definers;” the underlining question being when do we start collecting with our plans and roles in mind. However, it seems that our roles (in the preliminary work of representing neighborhoods, setting forth ideals, and combating politics) have many complex questions attached. [...] For that matter, how do we plan based on “value” and economics and remain “racially neutral” (as O’Conner suggests)? How do passionately fight for a community and still remain neutral? (Student A, Weekly Reflection, August 29, 2011)

**Objective:**  
Improve Neighborhood Safety with the Active Participation of the Neighborhood.

**Action Plan:**  
What this Action Plan can do:

- Establish a relationship between the neighborhood and the Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department (CMPD)
- Create an identity with the City of Charlotte as a safe and proactive neighborhood
- Create trust with the CMPD and to create a sense of trust and unity amongst community members.

**Why create this Action Plan:**

- Create a safer environment for the residents of the Graham Heights Community (GHC)
- Build a relationship with CMBD

**Step One:**

- Graham Heights Neighborhood Association (GHNA) board/officers contact 311 or go to <http://charmeck.org/city/charlotte/CMPD/safety/NeighborhoodWatch>
- Set aside meetings with the officer(s) that are assigned to the GH area

**Step Two:**

- GH board/officers appoint a GH Neighborhood Watch Leader:
  - This liaison, one of the board/officers, should be the main person to follow up and keep track of the progression of crime within the neighborhood.
- Plan a meeting agenda item:
  - To introduce the appointed GH Neighborhood Watch Leader, inform the GHNA members about how CMPD can inform the neighborhood on how to properly report crimes and conduct a very effective neighborhood watch group.
  - Print some of the information pages from the CMPD Neighborhood Watch website to hand out at the meeting.
  - Find out what the concerns of the neighborhood with in the realm of neighborhood safety to have an agenda and list of items for meeting with CMPD representative.

**Step Three:**

- GH NHWL and CMPD representative:
  - Have a meeting with CMPD representative showing them the list of neighborhood concerns
  - Create ways to reach out to the residents of the community and gain neighborhood participation
  - Gather information about ways to properly report crimes, and find out what situations may require police involvement.
- At the designated meeting:
  - Hand out the printed information pages from the CMPD meeting
  - Begin a discussion involving the members present, to help identify and prioritize neighborhood issues important to them\*

**Resources**  
<http://charmeck.org/city/charlotte/Transportation/Pages/Home.aspx>

\*Neighborhood watch is only strong when the neighborhood is dedicated to the improvement of the safety within their community. As well it requires a lot of participation from everyone that lives or works in the GH neighborhood.



#### SAFETY - NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

Figure 3. Recipe style action plan example – (from the 2011 community planning workshop).

This student's personal struggle provided a springboard into a broader class discussion focused upon the relationship of the readings (theory) to the work that the students were engaging (practice); questions of representation, knowledge production and power; and the changing roles that students take on as a process of neighborhood engagement unfolds. Struggles such as these, in the first weeks of the term, pointed to the fact that many students felt that the challenges they were facing were too large to address or that the multiplicity of roles that their activities raised were coupled by an almost paralyzing confusion about how to move forward. For many students, the fact that one could not simply "analyze the site" initially appeared to hinder their abilities to move forward.

As students progressed through the class, however, we witnessed shifts in their perceptions that indicated newly found footing. By week 6, student B had these comments about a string of weekly readings that he was now able to tie together:

As we were discussing the readings today and I looked at my notes, I found many statements that I feel sum up our intent as designers/planners: research findings prove that promoting equity is indeed a societal need, even when the main goal is economic development; some people expected that local poor and minority groups would resist the projects that invaded their environments, but no organized opposition developed; the main role of planners in these areas is to act gradually, in collaboration with all the participants in the regeneration game, to encourage some gentrification and medium-sized public-private projects, provided that the local residents, especially the poor among them, are among those who benefit from the revitalization process; it is important to make peace with the past in order to move into the future. (Student B, Weekly Reflection, September 19, 2011)

Even Student A seemed to overcome her frustration from earlier weeks:

The (recent) articles also helped further my thoughts about the need for an understanding and respect for history to thoughtfully plan for communities. I enjoyed reading about their process and found the ideals inspiring. Many of the articles about planning and the state of our cities can be somewhat disheartening or frustrating. They almost seem to serve as cautionary tales of disregard, greed, and a system that has lost the trust of the public. (Student A, Weekly Reflection, September 19, 2011)

We do not expect that students will emerge from our workshop as fully formed, critically engaged, and reflexive practitioners armed to save the world. Critically engaged and reflective practitioners are what we hope our students will *continue to become* as they move out of the academy and into professional environments. Students (it is hoped) will begin to see themselves as situated actors, or as "positioned subjects who have a distinctive mix of insight and blindness" (Rosaldo 1993, 19) and we have reason to believe that students have begun to see themselves in this light. For example, student Z points out that:

I have also learned that planning even at its smallest scale is a process. Before this class, I could plan something over a span of a week by drawing and designing things on the computer and I said that it fit the area. I can now see how unrealistic that actually is – when it's a process to just plan a Fall Festival, let alone design and plan something sustainable. So, now when I design things, I keep in mind the smallest things, which I believe, makes me a better designer and planner. (Student Z, Weekly Reflection, December 14, 2011)

This kind of reflexivity will augment a designer's ability to address the needs of diverse public constituencies that are increasingly unlikely to be from a similar background, cultural milieu, or economic circumstance. Our attempts have been to have students confront their own preconceived notions of who their clients might be, of the multiple publics that their work may affect, or of the voices not yet heard. Students must

be asked about the “others” for whom design is an unfamiliar practice but who must be considered as a part of the process; students must be challenged to question themselves, their conceptions of self, as a part of an on-going dialog that requires a “border consciousness” (Anzaldúa 1987) and an ability to cross multiple cultural borders (Giroux 1991). In a sense, we aim to avoid the imbalance of the knowing technocrat leading the unknowing other; instead, we strive for “authentic help” (Freire 1996, 54) – help that is built upon an understanding that grassroots empowerment, local knowledge, and do-it-yourself actions are equally as important to our learning (faculty and students) as might be our discipline-specific knowledge to local residents and community partners (Fischer 2000).

## Conclusions

Clearly, we are not alone in our quest to create critically engaged and reflexive practitioners. We see our efforts falling somewhere between what Dewar and Isaac (1998) describe as “liberal” and “radical” traditions within the literature of university and community relations. The liberal trend tends to promote “goals of social empowerment” such as “increasing citizen participation and informing policies that address social ills such as poverty, racism, and sexism” (336). The radical trend tends to promote the democratization of the university itself, which – as an institution of power – can be viewed as an agent “of an oppressive society” (336). This trend, then, aims to curb a university’s encroachment upon marginalized communities in which they often perform research. Positioned as it is between these two trends, our course requires that we (faculty and students) develop a comfort level with the unexpected changes and disruptions that lead to reformulations of processes at hand and to re-solutions to proposed outcomes. In this sense, we see learning as an iterative process in which all participating actors contribute to the production of knowledge.

By framing our workshop as a venue for public scholarship, the classroom becomes an extended research environment aimed not just at “thinking” but also at “doing.” Our work with under-represented publics raises issues often overlooked in many design and planning studios and the work encourages reflection in ways that often fails to emerge in traditional seminars. In this way, we bridge the gap between theory and practice and avoid the dual dilemma typically enabled by academic environments. As Kathleen A. Dorgan (Dorgan 2008) has pointed out, many researchers have found that community-engaged teaching environments foster public interest among aspiring practitioners, that they help build complex problem solving skills, and that they help empower both students and community partners. This is an interest that students can and do carry forward into both traditional planning and design practices such as urban design and landscape design positions or work within housing development entities in both public (United States Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD], for example) and private practices (affordable housing development companies). For some students, civic engagement through workshop experiences has contributed to a desire to pursue community-based work through research and academia – several students have gone on to doctoral or dual-degree programs that will impact the way that planning and design may be taught in years to come. And non-traditional avenues of community-design practice have opened up in recent years, which have drawn interest from students; organizations such as not-for-profit or public-interest design firms have now become attractive ways to pursue both professional experience and community engagement after graduation.

Our class’s emphasis on challenged neighborhoods has helped students reflect upon the role of the design and planning professions and upon radical planning’s transformative

agenda; in this way, we address the objectives of understanding the multiple publics that make up our diverse communities, of viewing planning and design as transformative practices, and of developing reflexive student practitioners. Civically engaged learning, in this way, addresses the dual dilemma that often cripples academic studies. And, scholarly engagement of this sort has the benefit of “encouraging civic imagination and creativity, and otherwise promoting a democratic way of life in a multicultural and increasingly globalized world” (Latham 2003, 2).

## Notes

1. For a set of representative exhibitions, see “Spontaneous Interventions: Design Actions for the Common Good”, exhibition held at the 13th Venice Architecture Biennale, Venice, Italy, August 29–November 25, 2012; “The Right to the City: DIY Urbanism Reconsidered”, exhibition and symposium held at Tin Sheds Gallery, Faculty of Architecture Design and Planning, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia, April 7–30, 2011; “Fringe Benefits: Cosmopolitan Dynamics of a Multicultural City, exhibition held at the Design Exchange, Toronto, Canada (July 9 – September 23, 2008). For a set of representative internet resources, see: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/30,577>; <http://www.spur.org/publications/library/article/diy-urbanism>; <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/the-interventionists-toolkit/24,308/>; <http://patterncities.com/archives/284>.
2. We are using the original publication dates of these texts, which represent the discursive lineage of underpinning guerilla, do-it-yourself, and grassroots urbanism within academic architectural circles; additionally, the texts cited within the body of this essay and those included in the references section represent the kinds of reading materials we ask our students to engage with over the course of a term.
3. The Boyer Report was commissioned by the following collateral architecture organizations: American Institute of Architects (AIA), American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS), National Architectural Accreditation Board, National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB), and American Construction Specifications Institute (ACSI).
4. This approach addresses the call of the American Planning Association’s Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct to represent the under-represented and marginalized.

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**Appendix A**

Table A1. The workshop's planning process

Timeline	Design Process	Actors/Agents	Disciplines applied	Skills
Pre-semester	Establishing partnership and negotiating expectations	Faculty, core residents, and partnership with City officials.	Political Science Communication	Negotiation, dialog, diplomacy
Early semester	Outreach organizing and relationship building	Neighborhood liaison and workshop students work with core residents and ensure that all residents are informed and encouraged to participate.	Social planning Community Organizing Social work	Ability to see value in local cultural histories and knowledge; Social Mobilization, Community Organizing, Advocacy, Inclusiveness, and Communication
	'What we think we know'	Students, research, prepare maps and document findings, which are then presented to the residents for feedback.	Planning Geography  Graphic Design Anthropology	Ability to hear local voices, local values and knowledge; Analysis/technical expertise Self-awareness, introspection, and sensitivity
	Adding local knowledge	Students facilitate processes that engage local knowledge and enable planning and design process	Sociology Planning  Urban Design Social Work Ethnography	Basic Design Communication and mediation Ability to understand social and environmental injustices
Mid-term	Pulling it all together – mapping existing conditions informed by expert and local knowledge	Students work with neighborhood residents pulling all the information together	Planning  Urban Design  Landscape Architecture Graphic Design	Analysis/technical expertise Communication and Graphic Design Advocacy Ability to integrate diverse points of interest/diverse range of issues and voices
	Beginning to vision a better neighborhood	Students and residents explore and develop alternatives those that address social and physical aspects of the neighborhood.	Urban Design   Architecture  Landscape Architecture	Creativity and urban imagination   Communication and mediation Championing social and environmental justice

*(Continued)*

Table A1. (Continued).

Timeline	Design Process	Actors/Agents	Disciplines applied	Skills
Final	Program development and implementation strategies	Residents prioritize what the most pressing needs are and have last say in the content of specific programs. Students research model programs and adapt to local context. Students and residents together develop strategies for implementation. Presentation with Public Officials	Design as Activism Design as Activism	Communication and mediation  Political savvy (while not directly engaged in the political process students engage in discussions of timing and strategy to make real change).
Post-Semester	Commitment to not just study the neighborhood but to also create usable products and to remain engaged to support implementation. Expanding analysis to include additional documentation of social justice and access to services – comparable analysis with other communities. Adding additional layers of understanding by interviewing local planners engaged in process and archival research. Making policy recommendations based on all the research.			

## Appendix B

Table B1. Course objectives and assessment measures

Intended Outcomes (from the syllabus)	Criteria or Target	Comparison	Assessment Methods or Tools	When/How Assessment will be Accomplished
(i) To introduce students to contemporary theory and practice in community planning and design and in participatory community practices particularly as these relate to issues of sustainable development, social equity, and social space	Target is 100% All students would gain entry-level skills.	(i) Review of Weekly Discussion Questions, Weekly Discussions, Regular "desk crits." (ii) Previous reports against current documents; weekly discussions.	Qualitative Assessments by faculty (i) Weekly Written Discussion Question Assignment. (ii) Weekly Discussion Question Assignment. (iii) Final Document and Draft Documents over the course of the term (reviewed in presentations and desk crits). (iv) Weekly Discussion Question Assignment.	(i) Assessments take place weekly with in-class discussions. (ii) Assessment takes place by reviewing weekly written reflections on readings and in desk crits of on-going work. (iii) Assessment takes place 3 times per session as students organize neighborhood meetings and events, collect oral feedback, and collect and compile community data; a comparative review of final documents occurs at the end of each term. (iv) Assessment takes place weekly in discussion sessions; assessment also takes place annually in review of final documents.
(ii) To encourage critical reflection on the role of neighborhoods in building, empowering, maintaining and sustaining communities through the experience in applying planning and design theories and methods to actual problems.		(iii) On-going research, neighborhood documents. (iv) Weekly discussion questions, weekly discussions.		
(iii) To provide students with experience in compiling and analyzing community-scale data, working with citizens, professional planners and designers, and elected officials, and preparing oral reports and technical documents.				
(iv) To examine what it means for the planner and urban designer to demonstrate ethical responsibility to <i>diverse</i> public interests, to clients and employers, to colleagues and oneself.				